

Valedictory Address May 2007
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Here at the University of Dallas, the first of the roughly 85 Core texts that we all “read” is Homer’s *Iliad*. This could be because it’s among the oldest, or because someone thinks it might be the best, or perhaps just because, when pitted in a virtual battle, Achilles would dominate any other protagonist, especially Boethius’ Philosophy. In the *Iliad* we meet many characters, and we soon find out that the precise reason that the *Iliad* is included in the Core is that these characters can be found in many other texts. That’s not just in other ancient epics like the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid* – several characters have cameos in Dante’s *Inferno*.

Literarily, we can find Agamemnon’s liberal professionalism in *Moby Dick*, Odysseus’ resourcefulness in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, and Paris’ prissiness in the character of Fanny Price. The University, no doubt, has us read such texts so that we may learn something, but what? What were they hoping to convey that would make us look at Hektor, Beowulf, and Sir Gawain as more than mere “options”? Maybe, that’s just it. Not choosing one such character as an “option”, but that we are, in some fashion, to make manifest what makes these heroes “heroes”. Having an inkling of this since early on, but not wanting to go overboard, I’ve quietly been sporting Achilles’ calves, and less discretely, Charlemagne’s good name.

While I’ve borne the burden of oversized gastrosoleuses almost flawlessly, other, more impressive and rewarding, qualities found throughout the Core are more challenging to live out today. Some because there is no occasion to which we must rise, and others, where the occasions are plenty, because to rise would be to go against the tide.

If we had been away from home for ten years as Odysseus was, and carried with us his sense of *nostos*, we, too, could have defeated the charybdis, ignored the songs of the sirens, and clung to the bellies of sheep to escape drunk, blind, and angry cyclopes. But isn’t that the situation in which we are? Isn’t our mission to get home? Yet, how often is our *nostos* overpowered by things that pull us in or lure us away? How often do we find ourselves eating from the lotus tree or losing our grip on the belly of a sheep?

It seems, then, that we do not have a need *for* heroes, but, instead, a need *to be* heroes. I think that herein lies the purpose of the Core texts: they’re training manuals. And, as cool as it would be to say they hold great secrets for the privileged few, they don’t. Make no mistake about it, what they contain is great, but it’s no secret. If it is, that’s only because they’re not read. But we, at the University of Dallas, do read them, do seek their lessons, and do stage 24 hour marathon readings and reenactments, though we actually call it “practice”.

What must we learn, then, to become the great men and women of our day? Homer wants us to define our *summum bonum* in the face of death, then pursue it with all our life. Jane Austen shows us the necessity of ordering our lives and the disaster of having Mrs. Norris do it for us. Dostoyvski and Shakespeare demand that we confront ourselves so that we may know ourselves. Nietzsche teaches us, among other things, that it’s best to not go crazy, and Aristotle teaches us – well, I have no idea what he was trying to say, it was pretty much Greek to me.

Dante wants us to follow his ascent of Mount Purgatory and unify our *eros* and *agape*. So, say you have a free weekend this summer and you decide to do this. What will you find at the summit? Who will you find at the summit? Hopefully, Beatrice – and purity. But who from our day has completed the ascent? I think one to whom the Class of 2007 helped the world say “goodbye”: John Paul II. He was a man who knew what the highest good was and pursued it constantly. He was a man who had his life ordered and and had confronted himself again and again. He was a man who knew Greek.

The late Pontiff had great power, and, though his estate consisted of no personal belongings, he had great wealth. What separated him from so many others with tremendous power and wealth is that he understood his power and wealth as for others. Aware that to do so would be nothing short of magnanimous, he urged us, “Do not be afraid. Do not be satisfied with mediocrity. Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”

When I was in *Piazza San Pietro* on the eve of his passing, I met a young lady from Croatia that had with her a news article. It was John Paul’s response to the gathering crowd, “I have searched for you, and now you have come to me, and I thank you.” She had read this and boarded the next train to Rome. However, before its departure, she heard a false report of his death. She arrived in the square clinging that article to learn that he was alive. To her, he had just completed a hero’s task and risen from the dead. Not long from then, he would satisfy his *nostos*.

So, are we to follow him, or rather follow Who he followed? We have been given what it takes to make the ascent, and from the top of the mountain, we are to reflect the *Lumen Gentium*. Should you, like Odysseus, find yourself off the path and lose your way, harken to Dante and:

“Consider your origin:
You were born not to live like brutes
But to follow virtue and knowledge.”
(Dante, *Inferno* XXVI, 118-120)

“Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”
(Dante, *L’Inferno*, XXVI, 118-20)

And the University of Dallas has educated us as such. It is now up to us. Looking to the Pope, we receive our charge, and also some encouragement, “If you are who you should be, you will set the world ablaze!”